



Dana E. Blackwell  
Executive Director

# LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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ADELINA SORKIN, VICE CHAIR  
DR. HARRIETTE F. WILLIAMS  
STACEY F. WINKLER

## APPROVED MINUTES

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The General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Monday, **December 5, 2005**, in room 743 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim transcription of events at this meeting.**

### COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Ann E. Franzen  
Helen A. Kleinberg  
Daisy Ma  
Rev. Cecil L. Murray  
Wendy L. Ramallo  
Adelina Sorkin  
Dr. Harriette F. Williams  
Stacey F. Winkler

### COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Carol O. Biondi  
Patricia Curry  
Hon. Joyce Fahey  
Susan F. Friedman  
Dr. La-Doris McClaney  
Sandra Rudnick

### YOUTH REPRESENTATIVE

Jason Anderson

### APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

The agenda for the December 5, 2005, meeting was unanimously approved.

### APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the November 21, 2005, general meeting were unanimously approved, and Chair Kleinberg thanked recorder Evelyn Hughes for their clarity.

## CHAIR'S REPORT

- An article in today's *Daily News* addressed the **25** percent increase in foster children running away from placement; the Commission will discuss this at a future meeting.
- Chair Kleinberg and Commissioner Franzen attended the recent Casey Family conference, which they found very valuable; two more sessions are scheduled this week, and Commissioners were encouraged to attend. One suggestion coming out of the conference was to build into training programs the 'shadowing' of foster parents, to increase trainees' understanding of families and communities. Commissioners Murray and Fahey will work with David Sanders to approach the universities about changing the training curriculum and incorporating related research.
- The Family Reunification Committee is looking at whether the department's birth-to-age-three population is being reunified or adopted, and what happens to those families. Statistics are available, but it's not yet clear what they mean.
- A fact sheet on Strengthening Families through Early Care & Education was distributed; Chair Kleinberg attended a meeting this week hosted by the Children's Planning Council to discuss this approach to getting child-care providers, children's centers, and family group homes to work with families in the child welfare system.
- Commissioners were reminded about the annual holiday luncheon on December 12, which Commissioner Biondi is hosting.

In March 2005, the Board of Supervisors asked that the department look at the decreasing utilization of group homes. The work group formed to address that issue has been meeting monthly since April, and includes regional administrators, the department's training section, and representatives from Mental Health, Probation, and several group homes (Vista del Mar, Five Acres, Optimists, The Sycamores, and United Care). Dana Blackwell has attended for the Commission. A six- to nine-month extension to the Board's original time frame was requested in July so that the group could continue to look at issues of management, and capacity utilization and planning. At the group's last meeting on November 22, approximately 2,600 children were reported placed in group homes—1,126 from DCFS and 1,009 from Probation. Of the 1,126 DCFS children, about 350 are age 12 or younger. That number, down dramatically from last year's 570, includes a handful of six-year-olds.

Ms. Blackwell reported that the group is recommending that the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) comprehensive assessment tool, already used successfully in Illinois and Philadelphia, be employed in conjunction with team decision-making (TDM) to discern the appropriate level for a child's placement. (Lisa Parrish will provide the Commission copies of the matrix comparing the three assessment tools the work group studied.) A pilot implementation plan will begin in January 2006 in the Metro and Glendora offices, rolling out to six additional offices in March. Ms. Blackwell distributed the "proposed pilot" document, and Ms. Parrish clarified that

expanding the implementation to all offices was dependent on increasing the number of staff who attend TDM meetings from 8 to 18.

Commissioner Williams asked how this new tool aligned with the department's existing plan to assess children before every move. A TDM meeting should occur before each placement change, Ms. Parrish said, and the resource utilization management (RUM) unit will perform the CANS assessment to make sure the child is placed at the correct level of residential care. Because Los Angeles County is so large, channels of responsibility and process must be put into place so that the Glendora office, for instance, follows the same procedures as the Torrance office.

Providers have been unhappy with the thought of losing beds or possibly having to shut down—though the growing wraparound effort offers opportunities for organizations to transition into community-based services—and the group-home census is dropping as children are moved back into the community. The work group believes the CANS tool will help find other children in the system who are bouncing between foster homes and could benefit from residential intervention. Seven-day notices have fallen off, and the work group is looking at why. A lively discussion is also going on about young people being moved abruptly. Ms. Parrish said that working better together around permanency plans was next on the work group's agenda.

The residential model is for short-term intervention, but no agreement exists about a length-of-stay limit. National research shows that treatment efficacy in group homes peaks in six to nine months, and more focus needs to be put on that. Chair Kleinberg suggested that the Commission return to the length-of-stay issue at another time.

Commissioner Ramallo expressed concerns over both the time needed to pilot a new assessment tool and the fact that the Probation Department will not necessarily use the same one (half the children in the probation system come from DCFS). Ms. Parrish agreed that the latter issue would be a good one to raise with the work group.

Commissioner Winkler agreed that the urgency of getting a standardized, effective assessment tool in place for all children is lost when the idea is passed from study group to study group and pilot to pilot. Why not simply hire the staff, train them, and make it happen? Every day a study group plans to meet, Commissioner Ramallo added, another child runs away from a group home. Every time employees who are afraid of change see "proposed pilot" at the top of a document, they know they have extra time to stir others up against it. Dr. Sanders has made it clear, Commissioner Winkler said, that staff who are not living up to their responsibilities will not be retained; the department's mindset must be changed to one of action.

**Commissioner Ramallo moved that the final pilot plan be presented at the Commission's January 9, 2006, meeting for a discussion of why it is not being immediately issued as departmental policy. In the plan, all goals should be fully completed by collaborating departments, each agency's role and responsibility should be clarified, and an implementation date should be included. Commission Winkler seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved.** Representatives from Mental Health and Probation will be invited to participate in the presentation.

## DIRECTOR'S REPORT

- Trish Ploehn, Deputy Director, updated Commissioners on the Board of Supervisors request to involve the **Office of Independent Review** in investigations of serious incidents and child deaths, as an adjunct to internal departmental reviews. As Commissioners recall, the Office of Independent Review (OIR) has been under contract to the Sheriff's office for some time to investigate its safety issues and special incidents. At a July 29 meeting with the Inter-Agency Council on Child Abuse and Neglect (ICAN), the auditor-controller, and others, no objection was raised to a similar contract for the Department of Children and Family Services. An August 11 response to the Board proposed setting aside \$226,000 for implementation, and laid out the fiscal impact, confidentiality issues, contract terms, and required staffing.

On November 15, the Board directed the department to arrange the contract and report back in 30 days on its progress. Supervisor Molina requested that a specialized contract be expedited to look into the recent death of a one-year-old in care, and the OIR is actively reviewing that case now. Final details are being worked out with County Counsel, and Board approval is expected in late December or early January.

Once the contract is in place, the OIR will be notified of all child fatalities and critical incidents; it will perform both independent reviews and oversee all internal investigations, giving input into potential disciplinary actions. Two full-time staff will be housed with the internal affairs section at departmental headquarters on Shatto Place, though they will be expected to assist regional operations as well. (An internal location has worked well for the Sheriff's office, as OIR personnel are close enough to work with others easily, yet are very successful at keeping a professional distance.) Commissioners will receive another OIR update in late January.

The office of the Inspector General is being dissolved and its budget redirected; that position has been vacant for some time, and the assistant who has been staffing the function will transfer to another position.

Chair Kleinberg asked Ms. Ploehn to find out whether a long-ago policy was still in effect—the department's request that hospitals perform a full body scan on any child coming in with broken bones.

- Ms. Blackwell asked Ms. Ploehn to give the Commission some context for the department's strategies and goals regarding planning for **Mental Health Services Act (MHSA)** funds. Ms. Ploehn offered a four-page document presenting a clear account of the process; copies will be made available to Commissioners.

The number of delegates forming the major MHSA oversight group has recently increased from 63 to 80, and DCFS has assigned Michael Russo as its representative, backed up by regional administrators from each service bureau. In addition to delegate meetings over the last year, 10 ad hoc work groups have also been meeting, and departmental representatives attend all having to do with children and youth.

The major plan for mental health community services and supports was submitted to the state on October 13. While the county waits to hear if it is approved, delegates are discussing implementation. Chair Kleinberg said that the Commission was more than willing to help in that process, but needed direction from the department.

### **STREET LAW: YOUTH IN TRANSITION**

Laura Cohen, an adjunct law professor at Loyola Law School, has created a program that trains law students to teach law-related critical life skills to transition-age foster youth in group homes and special-education settings. Lessons focus on issues such as housing, employment, education, consumer rights, and domestic violence, and each youth receives a binder with resources, referrals, and legal information specific to their individual transition plans. The program is in place in the nonpublic schools at Vista del Mar, Aviva Center, The Sycamores, the Kayne-ERAS Center, and The Help Group.

Ms. Cohen has gathered information from the public defender's office, the Alliance for Children's Rights, Public Counsel, the county's emancipation program, Teen Line, the Community College Foundation, and others. If anyone has further connections or suggestions, please contact her at [LauraCohen@msn.com](mailto:LauraCohen@msn.com).

### **EDUCATION COORDINATING COUNCIL BLUEPRINT**

Dr. Sharon Watson and Dr. Carrie Watson presented a draft of the blueprint for raising the educational achievement of foster and probation youth that is being developed by the Los Angeles County Education Coordinating Council (ECC). Education is high on the list of goals for these youth, second only to relationships with people who care about them. They see education as their ticket to success, yet the statistics about how far their achievement lags behind that of other students are truly devastating.

- About one-third to one-half of foster and probation youth perform below grade level.
- Nearly half of foster youth fail to complete high school, and fewer than 5 percent ever earn a bachelor's degree. (This is particularly grave because 75 to 80 percent of entry-level jobs now require at least two years of college.)
- Over 35 percent of foster and probation youth receive special-education services.
- The average reading level of probation youth in grades nine through twelve is below grade five.

To address this gap, two education summits were convened in 2003 and 2004 by the Children's Law Center of Los Angeles, county departments, schools, and advocacy organizations. The primary recommendation of these summits was the establishment of a countywide collaborative body that would provide oversight and accountability for the education of system youth. In November 2004, the Board of Supervisors authorized the creation of the ECC, where major stakeholders responsible for the educational performance of foster and probation youth come together. The ECC meets quarterly and is chaired by José Huizar, former president of the Los Angeles Unified School District

board (now a member of the Los Angeles City Council), and co-chaired by Judge Michael Nash and Berisha Black, emancipation ombudsman and former foster youth.

The Blueprint requested by the Board of Supervisors by the end of the ECC's first year is designed to raise the educational achievement of the 60,000 children under the jurisdiction of the Department of Children and Family Services and the Probation Department. As the Blueprint has been developed, the ECC has also been able to accomplish some 'quick fixes.' It has:

- Obtained a fee waiver for all foster and probation youth, and their children, in Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) programs
- Persuaded DCFS and Probation to appoint liaisons to connect foster children with available child-care slots in state preschools and Head Start programs
- Developed a sample educational case plan
- Worked with Beyond the Bell (a group of after-school programs serving students in LAUSD's 100 worst-performing schools) to enroll group-home residents
- Submitted a proposal to UCLA and the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce to train foster youth for entry-level jobs in the hospitality and retail industries, under the Workforce Investment Act

Dr. Carrie Watson is also working with the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance created by Congress to include language on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to make it easier for foster youth to self-identify, eliminate the need for a separate Chafee grant application, and make financial aid available to youth in relative care or guardianship.

A primary barrier to helping foster and probation youth educationally has been not knowing where they go to school. With the help of a blanket order from the juvenile court that addresses confidentiality issues, the ECC has performed a series of data matches. After initially finding only 4,500 DCFS children enrolled in LAUSD schools—far too few—a second match located 7,500. Although this number is still considered low, the data does validate some information, such as the fact that DCFS children are five times likelier than other students to be suspended, and that 40 percent are in special-education classes. The match between Probation and LAUSD is underway and will be presented at the ECC's January meeting. Further matches will be done for Probation and DCFS children in each of the school districts that sit on the ECC (Lancaster, Pasadena, Compton, Long Beach, and Pomona), plus one between students in The Sycamores nonpublic school and those in the surrounding community. Once individual schools are identified where clusters of foster and probation youth attend, departmental staff can be outstationed there and school personnel can be trained to deal with these youth's specific challenges.

Because the voices of youth are important ones for developing the ECC's Blueprint, 16 focus groups were held with 145 current and former foster and probation youth and 66 caregivers, to find out what would be most helpful to them in raising educational

achievement levels. A full report on the results of these focus groups will be available in January, and copies will be provided to the Commission.

Overwhelmingly, the most important thing youth wanted was Permanency and Education. Nearly every one said they look to teachers or school counselors when they need support. (Left out of the picture almost completely were foster parents, who were never mentioned as a resource.) In addition, they wanted:

- Teachers who push them to learn but provide assistance when necessary
- Adults who keep their word and understand what youth are experiencing
- Help with “the basics” (schoolwork, the exit exam, applications for college and financial aid)
- School counselors who understand the dependency and probation systems and have a desire to help youth
- Foster parents better prepared to help them
- To remain in one school—if they are learning
- Timely paperwork for school enrollment or transfers
- More information posted in public places about available programs and services
- Transportation to and from school and programs

What youth do *not* want are separate, stigmatizing programs for foster youth in the schools. Confidentiality and being involved in planning for their own education are very important to them.

The ECC believes that, to achieve the desired results, those responsible for the educational attainment of foster and probation youth must agree on:

1. The central importance of education for the current well-being and future prospects of children and youth
2. Maintaining high expectations for system youth
3. A strong investment in prevention, assuring that children are enrolled in high-quality early care and education programs
4. Early intervention in any factor affecting educational success, including social, developmental, health, and mental health issues
5. School stability
6. Biological families and caregivers being involved in their children’s education
7. A shared understanding of educational responsibility

The Blueprint presents some short-term practical solutions in four priority areas (early childhood education, youth development, data and information-sharing, and school-based staff support), outlines roles and responsibilities for everyone involved, and details the accountability measures needed for success. Copies of the full Blueprint draft are available from the ECC office at [swatson@cao.co.la.ca.us](mailto:swatson@cao.co.la.ca.us).

During the ensuing discussion, Dr. Sharon Watson confirmed that education plans would be put in place for all foster and probation children, birth to age 21, and that the ECC has connected with United Way's 'success by six' and 'reading by nine' initiatives. For community and state colleges, youth representative Jason Anderson suggested partnering with the state's Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP) to appoint an on-campus 'go-to' person and to establish priorities for foster and probation youth, since EOP slots fill up quickly.

Commissioner Winkler praised the ECC's efforts, asking if information-sharing was causing any problems for County Counsel. Ralph Rosato acknowledged that Rose Belda is the representative in his office who advises on educational issues, but said he believed that the county is working with LAUSD to get the relevant records released.

This draft of the Blueprint is being presented in a number of venues for feedback, and the final version will go to the full ECC in January for adoption. Chair Kleinberg suggested that the Blueprint be placed on the Commission's February 6 agenda for a formal vote of support, prior to its consideration by the Board of Supervisors on February 15, 2006.

#### **DCFS EDUCATION EFFORTS**

Lisa Parrish introduced Gail McFarlane-Sosa from the department's education initiative, who attends all ECC meetings and subcommittees. Even though the Blueprint has not yet been adopted, the department is moving forward with several projects.

- The **ABC Unified School District** (Cerritos, Artesia, Hawaiian Gardens, and parts of Lakewood) has received a 'safe schools, healthy students' Federal grant of \$5.7 million over three years. With these funds, it has formed a collaborative with DCFS, Probation, the Commission on Human Relations, Helpline Youth Counseling, Community Family Guidance, and the YMCA to create a community resource team that can meet family needs. A half-time social worker (a position the district wants to expand to full-time) partners with community agencies to link families to resources. Schools and families can refer children to the team, and youth can also self-refer.
- Dr. Sanders has begun quarterly mailings to the caregivers of **three- and four-year-olds**, encouraging them to enroll their children in early childhood programs and giving them information about what children need to know by the time are enrolled in kindergarten. Because both Head Start and Early Head Start give priority to foster children, Vice Chair Sorkin recommended that Dr. Sanders also encourage the caregivers of children birth to age three to access those programs. Twenty-five percent of the children in care are under the age of four, and another pair of eyes is always welcome, especially since most child fatalities happen to very young children.
- Though the state has not yet issued a letter of instruction regarding the **Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act**, which would assess children birth to age five with substantiated cases who are under DCFS care, the department is already discussing how to implement the act. Experts on child development and on education clearly need to be involved in team decision-making meetings.



- A brochure has been created explaining the responsibilities of the **holders of education rights**, which has been translated into Spanish and is being distributed at the courts and to school education liaisons. Even when children are removed from their homes, parents may still hold their education rights, and need to be involved. The department is now making information on holders of educational rights available to schools.
- Though recent legislation mandated that school districts employ **education liaisons** for foster youth, no funds were appropriated to make that happen. Personnel currently holding those positions generally have other full-time duties and may have no background or training in the issues foster youth grapple with. To support them, the department has connected with these liaisons via e-mail and is developing materials for them (a one-page flyer outlining what DCFS expects of schools and what schools may expect from DCFS, for example).
- Because the CWS/CMS system does not track the number of youth placed in out-of-home care who graduate from high school, the department was forced to do a hand count, but is not confident that their numbers are accurate. Starting next year, if students have all the credits they need to graduate but do not pass the state-mandated **exit exam**, they will not receive a diploma. Theoretically, students get three chances to take the exam, starting in tenth grade, but foster youth typically transfer between schools so much that they may not have those opportunities. The department has reprinted materials prepared by LAUSD's Beyond the Bell regarding programs for exam preparation that have good track records, and is encouraging all youth to participate. Commissioner Ma suggested adding preparation for the exit exam to the roles and responsibilities for youth and teachers listed in the ECC's Blueprint. Dr. Sharon Watson said that the ECC is working with Assemblymember Karen Bass to establish an exemption for special-education students (40 percent of foster youth) to the exit exam requirement. The first attempt was vetoed by the governor, but efforts continue.
- Changes in the **CWS/CMS system** in November eliminated nonpublic schools from the set of options to record children's school attendance. Although that information can be entered by hand, the department has asked the state to restore the list.

Chair Kleinberg mentioned that the Casey conference had discussed resource families and training them better in education issues so they would know the resources available and be able to follow up by transporting children to programs, etc.

#### **PUBLIC COMMENT**

There was no request for public comment.

#### **MEETING ADJOURNED**